Christianity and Hinduism Compared

BY

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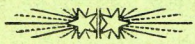

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Christianity and Hinduism Compared.*

RELIGION is as old as the hills. The higher a nation rises in the scale of evolution, the better and finer is its conception of religion. Religion determines the growth, the development, and the culture of various countries. Both Christianity and Hinduism have millions their followers, but narrow-minded persons have for the last hundred years been painting Hinduism in the most hideous possible colors. They have, through platform and press, shown to their satisfaction that Hindu religious doctrines are mythological accounts of the passionate escapades and cruelties of a host of imaginery gods and godesses. On the other hand, there is not a single movement of higher thought throughout the length and breadth of the United States that is not getting its inspiration directly or indirectly from Hindu philosophy.

The people of the West make little or no discrimination between the various communities inhabiting the vast empire of India. All the different religions now found among millions of Hindus go by the name of Hinduism. But in the words of a competent authority, "Happily, India, though it has at least twenty distinct languages, has but one sacred and learned language (Sanskrit) and one literature (Vedic) accepted and revered by all adherents of Hinduism alike, however

* Dr. Shastri delivered this lecture in Minneapolis on Feb. 4th, 1917.

diverse the race, dialect, rank, and creed.'' That remark does not hold good in the case of Mohammedanism and Christianity—both religions of Semitic origin and both claiming adherents among the people of India. Of the remaining population more than two hundred millions of people adhere directly or indirectly to the teachings of the Vedas, which are yet sealed books to the western world. Let us therefore analyze Hinduism:—

Scope and Extent of Hinduism.

The four Vedas are the foundation on which the superstructure called Hinduism is based. The Brahmans and the Upanishads are commentaries and expositions of the Vedic texts and deal with various physical and metaphysical problems. The four Upa-vedas deal exclusively with science. It is especially upon the subject matter of these books, says Gurudutta Vidyarthi, that a true estimate of Indian and occidental civilization can be formed by comparison. These four Upavedas are.....the Arthveda, the Dhanurveda, the Ayurveda and the Gandharvaveda. The Arthveda is the Upaveda that deals with the applied mechanics, engineering, perspection, practical arts (chemistry and physics), and geology. The Dhanurveda is the science of martial appliances, instrument, and tactics. The Ayurveda is the Upaveda that deals with surgery, botany, physiological chemistry, anatomy, physiology, materia medica, chemistry, and toxicology. The Gandharvaveda is the Upaveda of music and fine arts. Then come the six schools of philosophy—the Niyaya, the Sankhya, the Yoga, the Visheshaka the Mimansa and the Vedant. The teachings inculcated in the Bhagvat-Gita are based on the philosophies of both the Sankhya and the Yoga. The Vedantas are six in number. They are Shikhsha (alphabet), Vyakarna (grammar), Nirukta (etymology), Chanda (poetry), Kalpa (morals), and Jyotish

(astronomy). Then follow the Smirities (law books) which inculcate rules for social, moral, and civic life. Outside the pale of Vedic teachings, but allied in a good many other respects are Jainism and Buddhism—two distinct schools of philosophy in India. Besides these, there is a vast body of literature consisting of Puranas (history), epic poem, blank verse, fiction, drama, and folk-lore in sanskrit and its kindered languages which appeals to the masses in India as religious books or sacred literature. It is seldom that the missionaries can get an insight into this literature and realize the extent of its influence on the masses, but they betray their ignorance in denouncing Hinduism a heathenism as opposed to Christianity.

"It was in the midde of the nineteenth century that the startling discovery was made that the sacred books of the Hindus were written in a language related to the cultured languages of Europe; that its linguistic monuments betrayed a wealth of inflection in comparison with which those of the classical languages turned pale; and that it (Sanskrit) seemed to possess a stamp of antiquity by the side of which the European languages seemed like children. What could be more natural than the following conclusion:—The original form has been preserved. The farther the stream of emigration got away from home the more they lost by the way of their language, of their culture and of their past experiences."

The literature of the Hindus has no such word as "Religion." The word **Dharma,** mistranslated as religion does not stand for dogma or creed; it stands for righteousness or duty "to be applied in practice." Our sentiments toward God, our relations with our fellow-beings, the solution of thousand and one social, moral and philosophical prblems, the application of scientific knowledge, in short our individual and civic duties that ought to be applied in practie, all these can be comprehended in the

word Dharma. Hinduism is thus a system of philosophy or philosophies which are mainly founded on the basic teachings inculcated in the Vedas. Every philosopher has consequently lent his support to the massive superstructure of Hinduism. Here every phase of human life has been discussed and investigated. Philosophy and ethics, science and the arts found full scope in the domain of Hinduism. It, therefore, deserves a distinct chapter in the history of philosophy. It gave birth to all other civilizations of the world. It has left an ineffaceable imprint everywhere. While oriental scholars of various countries are enthusiastic over these philosophical monuments, our missionary friends are busy in denouncing these teachings, they themselves absolutely ignorant of their invaluable contents. To quote a few oriental scholars:—

"In the whole world there is no study, except that of the original, so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Upanishads. It has been the solace of my life, it will be the solace of my death."—(Schopenhauer.)

"I am neither afraid nor ashamed to say that I share his enthusiasm for the Vedant and feel indebted to it for much that has been helpful to my passage through life. They will maintain a place in the literature of the world, among the most astonishing productions of the human mind in any age and in any country."—(Max Muller.)

"The Vedant even in its falsified form is the strongest support of pure morality, is the strongest consolation of life and death."—(Paul Deusen.)

Christianity, on the other hand, has no philosophy. It is a system of ethics and social conventionalities. While Hindu philosophy has a place in the curriculum of all the decent universities of the West, the Bible has none. As no university, while teaching philosophy, can ignore Aristotle and Plato, so Kapil, the evolutionist, and Vyasa, the author of Vedant, can never be ignored. The

thinkers of the East can well afford to discriminate between philosophy and ethics—the two distinct phases of modern Hinduism but it would be difficult for a foreign missionary to comprehend the line of demarcation. He estimates the merits of Hinduism from the lives and beliefs of the ignorant masses. Both Christianity and Hinduism have many social accretions that have been accumulating from centuries past. Both need reforms. Both have been changing more or less in their conceptions. But the magnificent testimony of stupendous genius the boldest masses of intellectual masonry, and the wonderful monuments of ancient India are prominently standing apart in the form of literature and philosophy of Hinduism. These are the peculiar attempts at the unravelling of the mysterious nature. Consider, for instance, the philosophy of Yoga that deals with the conservation of human energy. Patanjali, the author of this philosophy, taught as follows:

Yoga means the concentration of the mental powers and the conservation of energy. The constant circulation of blood, the unceasing throbbing of the heart, and the ceaseless heaving of the chest and abdomen during respiration, which begin from the moment of birth and last till the dissolution of the body—all these efforts require a vast amount of energy. We hardly stop to esti- the constant tribulation which the wear and tear of respiration and circulation alone reflect upon our physical bodies. Each pulsation forces two and a half ounces of blood. Every minute gets about seventy-five pulsations and forces a large amount of blood through the system. The lungs respire over a thousand times per hour and use more than three thousand gallons of air. Multiply these figures by 365 days of the year, and you will be able to compute and realize the stupendous energy and the enormous lifework of the lungs and heart. Most of this energy thus consumed is frightfully dissi-

pated. Little or no return is made for this enormous expenditure. Consciously or unconsciously through our thoughts and actions we are dissipating this energy and shortening the span of our lives. The author takes into consideration all those physical and mental measures which tend to the wastage of this most valuable energy. He then lays down certain rules for the guidance of daily life, introduces certain exercises for breathing and concentration, regulates diet, advocates temperance, vegetarianism and a life of continence, and above all systematizes a code for adjusting ourselves to such a mode of life as requires little or no wastage but enough of the conservation of energy. He maintains that more energy is wasted in material transformations and mental dissipation than would be necessary to sustain the vital force in a human body for a hundred years.

Here is a system of philosophy which sets forth a detailed code of ethics, not because these are the commandments of some imaginary prophet, but because these are universal and accepted truths. Buddhism based its moral teachings on some of the aphorisms of this philosophy. The ethical observances may change, improvements in the methods and measures for the achievement of the ideal may be suggested, but the teachings of this philosophy will remain unshaken and unaltered. Its author has left an indelible imprint on the history of philosophy, which no missionary movement can possibly efface. What is true of Yoga philosophy holds good in the case of other schools of thought and collectively in the teachings of the Vedas. It is true, that Kant, Hegel, Mill, Spencer and many other savants have enunciated their philosophical thoughts, but they can find their peers in Shankar, Ramanuj, Goutam, Kanad and other philosophers of India. One may disagree wholly or in part with these philosophers of the East or West, but it cannot be denied that they have sincerely attempted

to solve the intricate riddles of the universe. While the ideals set forth by these Western savants form an integral part of civilization, Christianity has nothing through which to identify itself with these thoughts. In the domain of science, Newton, Descartes, Laplace, Darwin, Wallace and a whole host of worthy benefactors of humanity have brought messages of material progress and freedom of conscience to struggling humanity. It is an open secret that the Christian divines cannot identify themselves with any one of these scientists. While claiming the full credit of civilization to itself, the Church has been busy all these years with the persecutions of these benefactors. Hinduism, on the other hand had its scientists in the persons of Bhatti, Bhaskaracharya, Charak, Sushrut and others, but no religious zealot ever attempted to persecute them. They were rather hailed as benefactors and were accorded the right place in society they so worthily deserved. There could be no possible conflict between science and religion in India, for philosophers, scientists and reformers all were highly educated men and women. They espoused the cause of universal truth and could rationally prove and demonstrate the veracity of their statements. None, however, emphasized blind acceptance of dogmas and beliefs, whereas Christian theologians have put forth all their intelligence to lay stress on certain creeds and beliefs and have denounced all the scientific and philosophical thoughts which they believed antagonistic to their views. Western philosophers and scientists have always found Christianity a bitter opponent of progress in knowledge. The Church has upheld some of the grossest errors. It has opposed light and favored darkness. The struggle has been keen. It has been defeated in arguments. Its theories have been exploded time after time. It has been steadily driven back, abandoning, one after another, essential posi-

tions, until there is hardly anything worthy of the name of religion left of its original dogmas and beliefs.

Christianity and Civilization.

Priests and religious teachers attempt to instruct us that civilization owes its existence to the dominating influence of Christianity. So far it never has satisfied the thinking portion of humanity. As regards its ethics, every student of ancient history knows that the Church has been constantly assimilating the rituals and the moral teachings of diverse nationalities and religions (the most from Buddhism), and that there is no teaching worthy of the name which was original with the Church. Undoubtedly it has beautified ethics. Some of the virtues that form an integral part of other ethical systems have been incorporated as Christian virtues. The ideal may be good, but there can be no such thing as Christian virtue, Mohammedan charity, or Hindu ascetism. Apart from these teachings, there are social customs, civic laws, social manners and etiquettes, conventionalities and esthetic tastes, which after many a transformation have now come to be recognized as essential features of Christianity. They have seen a good many changes and are bound to change further with the growth in knowledge.

Take away some of the dogmatic beliefs which no longer are held in regard by thinking minds, and what remains of Christianity is society, its conception of morality, and its civic laws. And that is all it really is to the average educated man. In Hinduism, there are various sects and creeds exactly like the various Christian denominations with their dogmas, creeds, myths and rituals—the accretions of the dark ages. Hindu reformers are as enthusiastic as any earnest person could be in doing away with these absurdities, superstitions, and credulous beliefs. If we take away these dogmatic be-

liefs and nonsensical rituals, what remains of Hinduism is its original philosophy and its moral and civic laws. Social evils exist in all societies and Hindu society is no exception.

The history of India abounds with descriptions of struggles for reform. Reformer after reformer has assailed society in different periods for its social discrepencies, but none of them has raised his powerful voice against the teachings of philosophy, none has ever held it answerable for social degradation. The towering personality of Buddha brought a mighty reformation. Though ignoring the entity of Supreme Intelligence, he laid particular stress on the ethical code of living and expostulated a new and optimistic philosophy. In fundamentals his teachings were the same as Vedic teachings. Others have tried to cleanse society of its time-worn superstitions and errors, but none has attempted the insurmountable task of denouncing philosophical teachings. In the West, on the other hand, philosophers and scientists have boldly denounced the dogmas and myths of the Bible and have waged war against the social errors of the Church. The reason is not far to seek. Philosophers and scientists run down theological dogmas because they find them overbearing and absurd, whereas reformers attend to the social side and escape from arousing the ire of the Churches. But the merits of any religious system lie in its teachings and consequently it would not be out of place to discuss briefly some of the cardinal teachings essential both to Christianity and Hinduism.

Conception of God.

The conception of the Bible concerning the existence and the attributes of a Supreme being can be comprehended from the following:—

"And Adam and his wife hid themselves from the

presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. (Genesis III, 8.)

''And the Lord spoke unto Moses face to face as a man speaketh unto his friends.'' (Ex. XXXIII, 11.)

''And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower.'' (Gen. XI, 50.)

''And the Lord was Judah and He drove out the inhabitants of the mountain but could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley because they had chariots of iron.' (Judges I, 19.)

''For I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God visiting the iniquities of the fathers upon the children into the third and fourth generation.''

''And the Lord appeared to Solomon at night and said unto him: I have heard thy prayer and have chosen the place to myself for a house of sacrifice.'' (Chr. VII, 12.)

''Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I frame evil against you and devise a device against you.'' (Jer. XVIII, II.)

''Now go and smite Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have and spare them not, but slay both men and women, infant and suckling. (Sam. X.)

Thus according to the Bible, God is shown as a personal Being with a physical body, walking and talking and supervising and attending to His various avocations. He is depicted as a jealous and partial God who sends terror, death and destruction to the opponents of His believers. Sometimes His anger knows no bounds and He inflicts punishment upon innocent infants and sucklings. He spares neither age nor sex and devises various devices for framing evil. What wonder then if we find intelligent people disowning such a God? The wonder of all wonders is how tenaciously people in the West still cling to Him.

According to the Vedic teachings, He is an eternal entity. ''God existed in the beginning of Cosmos, the only

Lord of the unborn universe. He is the eternal bliss whom we shall praise and adore. (Rig.)

"Being All-vision, All-power, All-motion in Himself, He sustains with His power the whole universe Himself being one alone." (Yajurveda.)

"There are neither two gods, nor three, nor four—nor ten. He is one and only one and pervades the whole universe. All other things live, move and have their being in Him." (Atharveveda.)

"The Supreme Intelligence is an eternal verity. He is fore and behind, right and left, above and below, pervading all this stupendous universe through and through." (Mundakopanishad.)

"There shines neither the sun nor the moon nor the star, nor even lightnings illume Him, much less this terrestrial fire. It is through His lustre that all these shine; it is through His illumination that all this is illumined". (Ibid)

"He is verily immanent in nature, that is, He works from within it, controls, guides and regulates it and is transcendental at the same time." (Upanishads).

The conception of God according to the Vedic teachings is of one Unchangeable, Eternal, Intelligent entity even more vigorous than the mind. Material senses cannot perceive Him. To realize Him means the full growth, cultivation and developement of all mental faculties. It is through the laws that the source of knowledge can be realized.

Conception of Soul.

According to the Biblical account, soul is created and is declared "evil from the youth." It is not more than an ephemeral breath, a creation like things physical with a distinct beginning and no end and ordained to occupy a certain place in the creation. His wickedness on the earth is great and is therefore predestined to eternal pun-

ishment. And the Lord God said: "Behold! the man is become one of us" (Gen. II). "And God breathed the breath into his nostrils and the man became a living soul." (Genesis III, 26).

"And God saw that the wickedness of the man was great in the earth and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created" (Genesis VI, 5, 7.)

"And the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake for the imagination of man is evil from the youth". (Gen. VII, 21)

The Vedic conception of soul is quite distinct. Soul is an immortal, eternal and imperishable entity. It is endowed through mentality with thought and judgement, desires and passions, and pleasures and pains. Soul was never created. God and soul are both incorporeal and co-existent. They are, however, related to each other as the pervader and the pervaded. We read in the Upanishads:-

"There are two conscious entities possessing divine qualities, coeval companions, embracing each other and residing in one and the same universum. One enjoys the fruits of his actions and the other looks on the same unaffected by the consequences. "(Mundakopanishad)

"Through strict veracity, uniform control of mind and the senses, abstinence from sexual indulgence and following the laws based on invulnerable grounds in the domain of both the physical and the superphysical world, man should realize his Supreme Father who full of glory and perfection pervades the universe and whom devotees freed from passion and desire can realize." (Ibid).

Conception of creation.

Cosmogony forms an important part in all religious teachings. We gather the following from the Bible:—

"For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed." (Ex. XXXI. 17). "Hast thou not heard that the Everlasting God the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary?" (Is. XI, 28). "And the Lord God said, it is not good that man should be alone. I will make a helpmate for him. And out of the ground, the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air and brought them unto Adam to see what he could call them." (Gen. 11, 18, 19)

The Vedic conception is materially different. Cosmos, says Dayanand, is a vast empire of the visible objects—the compounds of elements constructed with all the perfection of design by the infinite wisdom of the Divine Architect. According to the Sankhya philosophy and the Vedic teachings, there are three eternal verities—God, souls, and matter, in this universe. The primary properties, the physical nature, and the modes of action in the eternal substances are also ever the same. The manipulation of their secondary qualities, accidents and energies constantly occur in their coalition and disappear in their separation, but the inherent power which produces their union and disunion is invariable in their nature. They unite and disunite again and again in eternity, thus the secondary qualities are also eternal in the regularity of succession. The Supreme Intelligence is the efficient cause of the universe and matter is its material cause. Both are eternal. But this particular cosmos in which we are living is not eternal. It had a beginning and it will have an end. The period during which a particular cosmos lasts is called a Kalpa and it consists of 432 million years. Our present solar system, roughly speaking was evolved nearly two hundred millions of years ago. Every cosmos is preceded and succeeded by an equal period during which matter lies in a state of chaos. Before this chaos there was another cosmos and so on

ad infinitum. Creation ex nihilo ex fit is an absurdity. This is the Vedic conception; any other account than this is a recension from the original.

Other Teachings.

In the Vedic literature we find that the learned are called Devas or gods, as distinguished from the common people; the ignorant as Asuras, the vicious as Rakshas (devils) and the hypocrites as Pishachas. These terms in common parlance have come to be known in India as mythological personages, but the Christian Church maintains the theory of the existence of an imaginary satan and a whole host of angels. The Satan, of course, plays an important part in the Bible:—

"And immediately after his baptism the spirit drove him into the wilderness. And he was there in the wilderness forty days tempted of satan." (Mark I, 12, 13.)

"And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, two men stood by them in shining garments." (Luke XXIV. 4.)

"And the devil that deceiveth them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophets are and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever." (Rev. XX, 10.)

The literature of Hinduism is practically free from these entertaining stories. Heaven means an uninterrupted enjoyment of pleasure and the possessions of means thereof. Hell is the excessive suffering of pain in surroundings of torment.

Christianity entertains the idea of a personal God seated somewhere and a particular locality for heaven and hell. We read as follows:—

"And I saw the dead small and great stand before God

and they were judged every man according to their works." (Rev. XX, 12, 13.)

Miracles have no place in the Vedic literature, but the whole superstructure of Christianity rests on miracles: "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God, for no man can do these miracles that thou doeth except God be with thee." (John III, 2.)

"And Israel saw that great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians and the people feared the Lord and believed the Lord and his servant Moses."

Concept of Religion in Hinduism.

According to Hinduism, religion consists in the maintenance of impartiality and justice, the speaking of truth, and the observance of other virtues which are the laws of God and are therefore consistent with the import of Vedas. The Upanishads state for instance:— "Children! always speak the truth, lead a virtuous life, abstain from sexual indulgence, never be negligent in learning and teaching, devote yourself to the acquisition of sciences (material and mental) until your knowledge is mature, then procure for your preceptor, to whom you are indebted, anything he wants. Enter then into household life and undertake the duties and the responsibilities of civic life. Never be indifferent to truth and duty. Never neglect your health or the cultivation of any skill or talent you may possess. Never be indifferent to the acquisition of wealth, power, etc. Never neglect your studies. Never neglect to serve your mother, father, teacher, and other true benefactors of humanity. Love virtue and shun vice. Remember! imbibe our virtues but not our faults and imperfections. Always keep the company of those learned men who are thoroughly imbued with piety; put your trust in them and in them only. Be charitable, give in faith or with-

out faith . . . If you are ever in doubt as to the truth of any doctrine, follow the noble example of those virtuous men who are free from prejudice, charitable in disposition, well-versed in science and philosophy and desirous of furthering the cause of truth and righteousness.'' (Aitreyopanishad.)

Every religion has its merits in proportion to the truth it inculcates. Christianity has developed certain phases and consequently has its place, but it is futile to except that ingrafted upon Hinduism it can bring about better results. That is why it has failed to appeal to the educated Hindus of India, who find in Hinduism a better philosophy and a higher conception of religion.

India in Scandinavia

by K. D. Shastri M. D.

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